

**THE CHALLENGES OF ACADEMIC ENGLISH FOR ACADEMIC  
COMPETENCE IN HIGER EDUCATION**

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# THE CHALLENGES OF ACADEMIC ENGLISH FOR ACADEMIC COMPETENCE IN HIGER EDUCATION

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## **Abstract**

This paper examines the challenges of academic English for academic competence in Higher Education in the face of present day globalization. First the paper notes the importance of English as an international language in countries like Nigeria where it serves many unique purposes in education, national unity and technological development. The various policy objectives of teaching and learning English right from primary school to higher education levels are examined. The challenges for tertiary institutions as they battle to respond to the demands of English for academic and technological development are then discussed. The roles effective competence in English can play in achieving these objectives are also highlighted. The need to develop new strategies forms the basis for the recommendations and conclusion of this paper.

## **Introduction: The importance of English Language**

In several dimensions, English occupies a unique place in Nigeria Education because of its significant role and status in national life. It is sociolinguistically important in Nigeria in spite of its colonial origin having become over the years the language of national unity and cohesion. Pedagogically it is significant as the language of instruction virtually all the entire school system from primary to the highest tertiary levels. Accordingly, a good credit pass in English has become mandatory for

transition from primary to Junior Secondary School and from Junior Secondary School (JSS) to Senior Secondary School (SSS) and for admission to all levels of higher education in the country.

Surprisingly and quite disappointingly, students' proficiency in English as measured by the West African Examination Council (WAEC) and the National Examination Council (NECO), examinations seems to be declining rapidly. For instance, the failure rate in English in the past ten years has been in the region of 70-75% annually which has been very disturbing and unacceptable.

The problem is not confined to English alone but extends to all other subject disciplines though in varying degrees. The close correlation between failure in English and other subjects particularly science subjects is quite evident and alarming. This seems therefore to lend strong support to the suggestion that the many failures in other subjects are really failures in English (Banjo, 1989; Aliyu, 1995). In other words, failures have been occasioned by poor mastery and performance in English, thereby revealing the close connection between communicative competence in English and educational performance generally. But as further noted by Aliyu (1995), these candidates cannot by any stretch of imagination be classified as educationally subnormal or intellectually deficient. It must be assumed and

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rightly so that the causes of mass failures are to be found in the inherent weaknesses of the educational system and the state of teaching and learning of English at all levels.

The problems of communication and subsequently for eventual academic competence usually start right from the primary school levels. Students enter higher education (by whatever means) after several years of impoverished learning of English right from the primary to the secondary levels of education and eventually to university or tertiary education levels. Let us before further discussions have a look at some of the objectives of English Language.

### **Objectives of Language Learning both at the Primary and Secondary School levels**

#### *i. Primary School*

At the end of the Primary School, pupils should accomplish the following:

- think, speak, read and write in English
- Acquire the ability to communicate effectively in the language, in both oral and written forms
- Show self confidence in the use of the language
- Acquire the necessary language and linguistic tools preparatory to the senior basic classes.

## *ii. Secondary School levels*

At the Senior secondary school, students should be able to achieve the following:

- express themselves correctly and fully in the language employing appropriate registers, lexemes and figures of speech
- read literature written in the language without difficulty and at reasonable speed
- Carry out continuous writing in the language by employing correct usages of grammar, idiomatic expression, orthography, punctuation and other mechanics of the language.
- Acquire the necessary tools, skills and competencies for tertiary education.

Unfortunately and ironically, these objectives are highly unattainable most especially in both the public primary and secondary schools which constitute about 75% of the schools in the country. By the time the student gets to the level of higher education the real challenge begins for the student himself, the lecturers and the university management.

## **Higher Education – Objectives of English Language**

Through the General English Studies (GES) the students should be able to:

- Build on and improve upon all the English language, linguistic and communicative skills acquired at the pre-tertiary levels.
- With particular emphasis on reading and writing in English with *competence* and *confidence*.

## **General crises in the Education Sector**

- Fuzzy policies
- Policy somersaults – It is one policy today and tomorrow another.
- Disconnect between policies and practices
- Overloaded curricula
- Overheated time-tables at pre-tertiary level
- Oversized classes at all levels
- Poorly motivated teachers and learners
- Improper, inadequate assessment practices (Orals, Practicum, Written Exercises)

- Analog teachers and teaching  
(Emenanjo, 2011)

### **Challenging Issues**

Having examined some of the main broad objectives of English language at all the three levels, and the general crises in the educational sector, let us critically examine some of the challenging problems at each of these levels.

#### **Primary School level**

(1) *Under Resourcefulness*: Following Olaofe (2011) Teacher under Resourcefulness at the Primary School level can be divided into three categories (Olaofe, 2011).

(i) *No Resource Categories*

These are primary and secondary schools without any form of educational resource materials. No chalk, chairs, textbooks and qualified teachers who could hardly speak any form of good English. They are largely in the rural areas. Lessons are taken in dilapidated classrooms. Pupils sit on the floor. Teachers in this category are grossly under resourced. A picture of such a no resource school is shown as reported by Olaofe (2011).



Getting to this school took me forty five minutes on okada-motocycle. I crossed two big rivers, each hardly passable during rainy seasons. The okada man, a native of the area, missed the rugged road because the road he was used to had been taken over by a farm land. I finally got to the school to find out that only four teachers were there to run a school of six dilapidated classrooms and over 600 pupils. One of the teachers was the head-teacher, one Arabic teacher, another Islamic studies teacher and the last teacher being the one that was teaching other subjects from primaries 1-6. My observation of the other subject area teacher in the actual classroom discovered that he missed spelling of every English word written on a makeshift blackboard. Pupils were on the dust as there were no exercise books. Of course, textbooks were a forgotten story.

(ii) *Low Resource*

About 60% (Olaofe, 2011) of Nigerian Primary schools belong to this category. These are schools with very limited solid classrooms; a classroom may be split into two with a temporary structure of mud walls, limited textbooks, exercise books, desks and chairs. Nothing like modern gadgets or ICT facilities. The challenge is completely insurmountable for the under-resource teacher.

(iii) *High Resource Schools*

Conservatively put at 10% of the Nigerian Primary schools. These are schools characterized by modern teaching-learning facilities described by ICT terminologies such as digital education technologies, e-teaching and e-learning, well-equipped libraries, more than one textbook per subject, desktops and mini-laptops, tele-networking system, on-line learning, web classrooms, and web-based on-line examination. These kinds of schools are

for the rich. Invariably, teachers of this category of schools are more resourceful and more motivated than those in *no* and *low* resource schools.

### Secondary Education

These categories of *No* resource, *low* resource and *high* resource described above are repeated at both the junior and senior secondary school levels. Teachers from some of this category of schools are so detached from modern technologies, modern methods and poor training. Certainly what teachers teach, students learn. Unfortunately again, this is the stage at which the student is preparing for higher education.

In a recent study covering twenty rural secondary schools in five local government areas in a State in Northern Nigeria, this presenter investigated ICT awareness and use amongst both teachers and students. The following were the very shocking real life observations and discoveries in these schools.

- (i) Many of the students had never seen or heard about a computer or any form of ICT in their lives.
- (ii) All the teachers (100%) had never use or have any form of access to any form of computer or ICT.
- (iii) *Relevance of Computer/ICT to ESL* – The few urban and semi urban schools where very few and outdated computers were found

did not admit to seeing any relevance of computer to English language teaching.

- (iv) *Access to Computer* – Almost all the teachers admitted to not owning any form of computer and even never hoped to own one in the nearest future.

*“The computer is for big people (sic) and I am a poor teacher. How long do you expect me to save to purchase a computer with my small salary (sic).”*

Most teachers also do not support the idea that schools and teachers be supplied with computer and/or laptops. Again here are some of their responses to this idea:

*“Computer for what”? This is not my problem for now. Students cannot even read their basic textbooks, how do you then introduce the computer! Hey!! The standard of English will go from bad to worse*

*“Do you think we are in America or in England where everything works and nothing fails? Even the spare parts will be stolen by the provider before they get to us. And also where is the light (sic) (electricity) for computers to work?”*

Finally, all the teachers in this sample agreed and felt that their training in English and education courses have not in anyway prepared them to use modern technology.

*“Can the blind lead the blind? Most of us are still ill-prepared for the job at hand. We are ready to integrate (technology) but the system should first integrate us first (sic)”*.



There are some of the appalling and gloomy situation in which English language is being taught in both the primary and secondary level of Education in Nigeria.

### Higher Education

According to Nigeria's National University Commission, the minimum standard of the goals of General English/General Studies are as follows:

- Exposure of graduates of Nigerian Universities to the rudiments of ICT for computer literacy and the ability to live in the age.
- Preparation of students for a post university life with opportunities for job creation and entrepreneurial skills.
- Production of graduates capable of communicating effectively (both oral and written).

This is where the challenge for higher education with regards to effective communication in English begins to manifest. Students enter higher education (by whatever means) after several years of impoverished English language learning already discussed. It is also at this level that the objectives as enunciated by the National Universities Commission and the broad objectives of English teaching and learning for academic competence come in variance with the students' performance both before and after graduation.



On entry into the university, the students as a result of weak and very poor background in English are faced with very serious deficit challenges in English language for academic competence. These challenges are specifically in the

- *Linguistic components of academic English – In phonology, it is usually poor and very embarrassing pronunciations everywhere.*
- *Grammatical components –it is not unusual to experience a student being unable to construct a complete sentence without grammatical flows*
- *High Deficiencies in the discourse components of academic English.*
- *As a result of poor background in English, students are highly deficient in the knowledge component (either declarative) i.e. Knowing that or procedurals: knowing how*

*Higher order thinking ability - deficiencies- This is involved in interpreting evaluating and synthesizing what is read or heard from lectures*

*Metalinguistic - Awareness of academic English i.e. ability to think about*

*Language use – this has quite often been a problem for a large majority*

All these components become a huge challenge for the lecturers who are expected to teach general English for just one academic year in spite of these several years of poor acquisition of English language under infelicitous learning conditions.

## 2) *Challenge of poor infrastructural facilities*

Large classes, inadequate teaching aids and lack of ICT facilities are still a fact of life in many of our tertiary institutions. All these put restrictions in our experimentation with teaching and learning.

There is in addition to logistic problems, poor financing and lack of enthusiasm by university authorities and a noticeable nonchalance on the part of the students. Even though the students and the authorities do not doubt the utility of English as a medium through which they have to carry out their functions in the English as a Second Language (ESL) situation in Nigeria.

### *Cumulative Results of these challenging deficits*

- *Poor English Language usage everywhere*
- *Gross incompetence within and across all levels of formal non, formal and adult education*
- *Embarrassing errors and mistakes, code switching and mixing everywhere.*
- *Pervasive multi linguslism*
- *Nigerian Pidgin everywhere in the University campuses and other tertiary institutions.*
- *ICT Illiterates*
- *Graduates who would not qualify for employment even in the local industries.*

### **Consequence**

Communicative incompetence and confusion every where such that

*What is said is not what is meant*  
*What is meant is not what is said*  
*What is heard is not what is meant*

*Such that what ought to be done remains undone  
And the education system stands in confusion  
(Confucius cited by Emenanjo, 2011)*

## **Recommendations**

- 1. Training and Re-training in Human Resources**
  - i. There is the need to train and retrain teachers and lecturers competent in Applied Linguistics
  - ii. Teachers who are bilingual in both teaching and learning
  - iii. Train ESP/EAP teachers.
- 2. Revisiting**
  - i. All existing policies about ELT. The British council and the MDGs have been playing noble roles in this direction. However there is the need to revisit some of their training policies. For example occasional workshops seminars and short term trainings are quite often organized. One wonders whether a seminar or a short training of just one week or even a month (as usually the case) can have any meaningful impact on a teacher who has been weak and poorly trained over the years.
  - ii. All existing practices in ELTT. Too much teaching through old fashioned methods are done with very little learning.



iii. All extent curricula in ELTT. The entire curricula are over bolted with too many theories at the expense of practice.

### 3 Change of Teaching and Learning methods

About 80% of Nigerian teachers of ESL still teach through the old fashioned analogue methods of teacher talk – pupils listen (sometimes Passively) and chalk method. There is therefore the need to add mixed media to face to face.

ii. There is the need to introduce and effectively use tutors and lectures who are ICT literate. For now more than 80% of the teachers in public primary and secondary schools are ICT illiterate. At the tertiary level, there has been some remarkable improvement in the provision of ICT materials and training. However, the provision of ICT and other digital technologies are still inadequate and in some tertiary institutions no existence.

iv. There is the need to emphasize written and oral literature as a compulsory subject for certification. This is because as right noted by Emenanjo (2010). It is literature (not grammar), that establishes and sustains literacy and book culture, and sustains the vitality of any language.



- Encourage and promote reading culture in Nigeria. It is often said rather derogatorily that if you want to hide anything from a Nigerian, hide it inside a book. The world over, the leading, ruling and winning people are the literate and reading people.

#### 4. Restructuring

The General English programme as it is in Nigerian tertiary institutions needs to be restructured in terms of :

- i. Objectives – this should be in terms of competence and utility value.
- ii. Human Resources: people qualified and trained in Applied Linguistic and/or ESP/EAP
- iii. Pedagogy – Very little time and priority are allocated to English.
- iv. Non Human Resources – Crowded classrooms unmotivated students and even colleagues.
- v. Instead of the one year crash programme which has been very inadequate and ineffective, English language teaching should be compulsorily taught throughout the entire 4-5 years. This may help to make for the previous years of poor learning in both the primary and secondary schools.

English language has become a global language. It should therefore not only be encouraged but should continue to be supported with renewed vigour.

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